

## **News from U.S. Rep. John Spratt (D-SC)**

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Wednesday, June 11, 2003 – For Immediate Release

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### **Rep. Spratt's Tribute to Tom Gettys**

On Saturday, Tom Gettys made a final pilgrimage to Williams Gulf, and on Sunday, he and Mary Phillips went a last time together to the First ARP Church. Sunday evening, he slipped quietly away, dying in the town he loved, where he had spent his life, much of it serving the people.

The term "public servant" is often misapplied, but in the case of Tom Gettys, it is a perfect fit. He was a school principal and coach; right-hand aide to a high-ranking congressman; a naval officer who volunteered for duty and served in the Pacific; a postmaster; a night-school, self-taught lawyer; and for ten years, a Member of Congress.

As congressman, he endeared himself to the people who elected him. If folks in the Fifth District revered Dick Richards and admired Bob Hemphill, they loved Tom Gettys. They loved him because he had an easy-going affinity for all sorts of people, and because he put his constituents first and worked hard for them, and they knew it.

When he was at the top of his form, Tom Gettys retired. He had the good grace not to hang on in Washington to capitalize on his relationships, but instead came back to Rock Hill, hung out his shingle and practiced law. As a young lawyer, I used to run into him checking titles with the rest of us in the clerk of court's office. This was the self-deprecating side of the man that people appreciated. He took his work seriously, but never himself.

I saw this side of Tom Gettys when I was in Washington in the 1970s and walked with him to the House floor. Tom knew the Capitol police, the elevator operators, the doorkeepers, all by first name. He told me later that having been a staffer, he knew who ran the House.

I got an even better insight when Tom visited me soon after I was elected. I begged him to sit and talk, but could tell he had something else on his mind, and soon found out what it was. He wanted to go downstairs to the Longworth Cafeteria and speak to Odessa. Odessa ran the breakfast line, and was a spirited soul, full of chatter and advice, which she dished out freely while you

decided how you wanted your eggs. Tom seldom came to Capitol Hill without visiting Odessa.

Tom Gettys belonged to the old school, to the era before pollsters, spin-masters, and 30-second spots, and he often told me, it was a good thing. He enjoyed introducing me as the “second-best looking congressman to represent the 5<sup>th</sup> District.” I enjoyed telling him, “Tom, if good looks had anything to do with being elected to this office, you would have lost to Bate Harvey in 1964.” He was not some political artifact, crafted to win elections. He was the genuine article – of the people, by the people, for the people. When many of his conservative colleagues voted against Medicare, Tom Gettys stood with his people. He voted for it, and was proud of it.

If he were to give his own farewell, he would tell us that marrying Mary Phillips White surpassed all of his achievements, and Julia and Beth were their crowning glory. He was a doting grandparent and used to say that if he had the chance to come back after dying, he would want come back as one of his grandchildren.

Those of us who learned from him and looked up to him will miss him. We will miss the wisdom he shared with us, and the stories that never grew old. But we will never forget all that he did for us. He exemplified what life in a democracy is about. He earned the satisfaction every public servant wants: he left his country better than he found it.

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